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ABSTRACT

In this paper is discussed how educational research might be made relevant to the urban community. Ways in which the community can be involved in research projects so that they will come to understand the purpose of these projects are suggested. It is believed that "residents of the urban community are not anti-research. When the purposes and scope of the research are explained to them carefully and when they are given some opportunity to be involved in the conceptualization, data collection, and interpretation of research, they will support educational research enthusiastically." (Author/JW)

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HOW TO MAKE EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH RELEVANT TO THE URBAN COMMUNITY -- THE RESEARCHER'S VIEW[1]

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When one speaks of the urban community today most of the time he is referring to the Black, Puerto Rican or Mexican-American residents of the central city. In this paper I shall be referring to these residents of the urban community when I discuss the relevance of educational research. The concern of residents of the inner-city about educational research stem from what they see as its inappropriateness and the insensitivity of many educational researchers as to the real problems of the inner-city. They also feel that educational research is used to publicize some of the negative characteristics or behaviors of inner-city residents. It is important, therefore, for researchers and administrators to give serious consideration to the complaints of the residents of the inner-city about educational research and to attempt to rectify these complaints in the sense of making educational research more relevant.

As a researcher it is incumbent upon me to define my terms; therefore, I should define what I mean by "relevant". Relevant, which has become a "jargon" word in the world of education and community politics, means that research or some other educational activity

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is in some way related to the actual problems of the community or the school, and in some way might have some immediate transfer value to the actual situation. We, as researchers, know that applications of research are not easy to come by. In many areas that we have studied for years we have not been able to gain agreement among educators or researchers about either the cause of a particular phenomenon or the ways of dealing with it. An example that comes to mind is reading. Reading research studies are quite numerous, yet, there is no universally agreed upon method of teaching reading either to the more affluent residents of the community or to those residents whose cultural and experiencial backgrounds are somewhat different from those of the larger society. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon education researchers who are working with the residents of the inner-city to attempt to make their research more relevant, more meaningful, and more useful to residents of the inner-city and to the teachers and professionals who will be using the research.

The first consideration in making research relevant to the urban community concerns the topic to be studied. Probably more criticism has been directed toward the selection of the topic that is to be studied in the urban community than any other area. For example, many educational research studies have been comparisons of black and white pupils. In the logic of science, comparisons are made because one expects, or thinks there might be, some social or

intellectual value to be gained from making this comparison. Since in most comparisons involving blacks and whites, blacks usually come out below the so-called societal norm (in everthing except physical matters), it is no wonder that black community residents are concerned with the type of research. Most scientists and scholars are now aware of the very complex factors involved in studying genetic matters and the different types of environments in which most blacks and whites live in the United States and tend to be careful in making claims about black-white differences. Since questions on the abilities of blacks as compared to whites are apt to be vastly oversimplified, researchers should be very careful about the type of variables and hypotheses that they attempt to investigate. Too frequently educational research in the inner-city leads to the conclusion that something is wrong with the pupil -- rather than something being wrong with the educational process or the teacher.

In selecting topics for research, we should be careful to select topics that will consider not only the classical types of research involving methods and achievement but also research concerned with the process through which education takes place, for example, ways in which various methods are used and the types of

professional preparation and supervision that are being carried out. Many of the beautifully designed programs dealing with education for blacks, or whites for that matter, are not carried out well in the field. As a matter of fact, one of the problems raised by researchers on educational innovation is that, in the initial stages of an innovation, the "halo" effect, the "attention" effect or the "enthusiasm" effect tends to cause the innovators to do things that either are impractical in a realistic situation or are done extremely well in an experimental situation for the purpose of supporting the hypothesis in order to justify the grant or the project. Researchers should try to be sure that they are studying phenomena that are significant to real education problems.

The next concern in making educational research relevant to the urban community has to do with the involvement of community itself. Frequently, community residents and teachers working in the community do not recognize the purpose of the research. They should be made aware of what the over-all purpose of the research is. One problem with this recommendation, of course, is the problem of contamination. If the purpose of the hypothesis is too clearly explicated, it is possible that the research will be contaminated by a number of factors. On the other hand, it is possible to communicate in a general way to both the community residents and the teachers in the schools of the community what the overall purpose of the research is. Further, by following some of the steps which I will outline later, it will be possible to diminish some of the suspicion that

many community residents have about educational research. Suspicion about educational research has risen to such an extent that in some communities, the most recent being Boston, community residents have presented stipulations about the conditions to be followed in order to be able to do research in the Black Community. An example of such stipulations is presented below.

REQUIREMENTS FOR RESEARCH TO BE CONDUCTED IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY OF BOSTON

1. A committee, under the auspices of the Boston Black United Front, including Black behavioral, medical, and social scientists, will be established as the Community Research Review Committee (CRRC).

2. All research grant proposals that intend to use members and/or facilities in the Black community must be reviewed and approved by the CRRC before any such research may begin, and be subject to continuing approval by this committee.

The easiest way for this requirement to be met is for a close working relationship to be established between the CRRC and local University grant and contract offices. In their final review of grant applications, these offices should routinely forward any research proposal outlining research in the Black community to the CCRC for review.

3. Projects to be conducted in the community must provide to the CRRC sufficient funds for the committee's operation. Such funds are calculated as roughly equivalent to 10% of the total project funds.

4. All research conducted in the Black community must involve significant Black personnel, including a Black co-investigator who is approved by the CRRC. The role of the Black staff would, of course, vary with different kinds of projects and investigations, but generally, their primary role would be to protect the interests of the Black community. This might take the form of creating positive side-effects of the research, (employment, new facilities, etc.) looking for positive uses to which the research results could be put, discouraging politically unwise decisions and so on.

With respect to the research itself, Black staff and consultants should be involved in all aspects of the study including:

a. the design, and development of the study
b. the implementation of the study
c. the monitoring of the study
d. the analysis and interpretation of the results
e. the preparation and publication of reports, papers, talks, etc. based on this research.

5. Copies of all data and subsequent analyses will be deposited with the CRRC as these become available. The confidentiality of such materials will be maintained by the CRRC.

6. Copies of all project reports, including interim and final reports, as required by the funding institution, must be filed with the CRRC.

The most sensitive aspect of research in the Black community involves the analysis and interpretation of research findings and the manner and style with which these reports are made public. It is in this area that the CRRC must exercise most careful and meaningful contact with all research.

Thus, after analyzing the data, summarizing the results, and preparing a preliminary final report, but before disseminating this information to the professional or lay public or to the funding source, the principal investigators must:

a. circulate a copy of the report to the CRRC for review and comment, criticism and, if necessary, rebuttal. Any consultation services the CRRC requires for competent review of the report are to be paid by the research project. In addition, the principal investigators may have their reports reviewed of their own initiative in which case such reviews should be included with the report when it is sent to the CRRC;

b. agree to include (under separate authorship) as part of the final report and as part of any subsequent publication of the findings, a critical presentation of any alternative interpretations of major findings which cannot be reconciled with the investigator's main finding.

While I, as a researcher would not subscribe to all of the stipulations because of the implications of censorship, I agree with

the general intent. I think, following the general spirit of the recommendations, it should be possible to work out a rapprochement with the community residents and the teachers so that there will be community support for the research. I must say, however, that it will not be possible to eliminate a certain amount of suspicion or hostility in all instances, and, at that point, the researcher must consider whether he wants to continue with the research in the face of the type of community reaction he has received.

One specific way of involving the community in research is in the use of community residents as research assistants, ranging from para-professionals to professionals. In order to do this, it would probably be necessary to have a top professional staff member of the research team who has some ethnic identification with the community in which the research is being done. This, in a sense, is the position taken by the Boston group. Care must be taken in selecting staff personnel not only from the standpoint of meeting community objections, but also from the standpoint of conducting valid research. Data should be collected in ways that assure validity and, at the same time, are not insensitive to the needs and concerns of the students, teachers or parents being interviewed or tested.

The question of testing and instrumentation is another factor which is related to making research relevant to the urban community. If the research techniques or instruments that are being used cannot be understood by the students or community residents participating in the research project, then the research, itself, is probably not

valid. In fact, assistance from community residents and teachers working in the city schools can be very helpful in reviewing research instruments to see that they can be understood and are related to the interest level, motivational level and the cognitive level of the subjects in the study. As a researcher, I maintain that the question of making research relevant to the urban community and the question of doing valid, meaningful research are not polemic matters but rather are concerns that every researcher should have. If these concerns are met openly, without the specter of censorship, I believe that the contributions of community residents and teachers in the inner-city schools in planning and conducting research will contribute to the improvement of the quality of research.

After the data collection and analysis are completed, the last big problem in any research is that of the research report. The research report and the use of the report has caused considerable anger among black community residents. This relates in part to what is studied, but also relates to the way in which the results are presented to the general public. Too frequently, research findings are presented stressing negative findings or things that are not particularly complimentary to inner-city residents or to inner-city teachers. On the other hand, certain reports paint such a glowing picture of things in the inner-city that a false picture is given. It is imperative that the researchers be cognizant of these concerns in writing a research report. The research report should be

clear and should use necessary technical language, but, should not regress into "jargon" (a process which researchers frequently fall into). It has been even suggested that there could be two types of reports -- one for the professional and one for the lay public. I believe this is a good idea. We must, however, be careful that what we say, in intent and fact, is similar in both types of research reports, even though the language, itself, might be different.

The part of the research report that community residents are most concerned about has to do with the implications. Too frequently, implications are broadly and carelessly drawn, often from the point of view of social class or racial superiority. This means that the implications section must be considered very carefully as it is being prepared and, as suggested by the Boston group, the implications should be read or discussed with various residents and/or teachers of the inner-city to be certain that the main points are gotten across clearly. Also, it might be desirable to allow for a rebuttal in the form of a minority report or in the form of a written statement, which could be appended to the study. In those reports which are not particularly lengthy, a written rebuttal by members of the community may not be necessary, but the researcher himself should at least acknowledge other possible interpretations. This is difficult for the researcher because, on one hand, he's saying, "Here are my findings" and, on the other, he's saying, "I'm not so sure about them". But, in one sense, this is what research is all about; we should allow for different interpretations of research findings. It's only as these tentative conclusions begin to be collarborated in a variety of studies that we arrive at

what we think is the truth or is a fact or principle. To acknowledge the possibility of alternate explanations, in my opinion, is not to plead incompetence, or to stand on the fence, but rather is to recognize quite openly that we have studied an area where there might be different points of view. In longer reports, I think it would be more useful for the community residents or professionals who reside in the community to make a statement relating to the implications of the study for inclusion in the research report.

In summary, I want to reiterate the point that the steps that can be taken to make educational research relevant to the urban community, particulary the inner-city, are also steps which, I think will improve the overall quality of research. Much is expected of the educational research enterprise; in fact, often too much is expected of the enterprise of research. This means that those of us who are researchers must be careful not to indulge in self-fulfilling prophecies about the way in which community residents will perceive our research. I believe that educational research can be made more relevant to the urban community. I further believe that residents of the urban community are not anti-research and, when the purposes and scope of the research are explained to them carefully and when they are given some opportunity to be involved in the conceptualization, data collection and interpretation of research, they will support educational research enthusiastically.